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How Killing Awlaki Affects America, Al Qaeda, and the Arab Spring

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The drone killing of Yemeni-based US citizens Anwar al-Awlaki, one of radical Islam's premier internet preachers, and Samir Kahn, editor of *Inspire* magazine, the online English-language production of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has generated a cackle of opinion and analysis, often contradictory and misinformed.

Rep. Peter King (R-NY), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, says that it is a "tremendous tribute" to President Obama and the Intel community to have killed Awlaki, the ideological leader of al Qaeda and a man even more dangerous in recent years than Osama Bin Laden. Presidential candidate Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) claims the president violated his oath to the Constitution by "assassinating" Awlaki without due process, thus putting Americans -- and in the first instance outspoken American Muslims -- in jeopardy of summary execution without public charges or trial.

The facts, however, invite neither great praise nor great condemnation of the president. But they do point to a brief opportunity to shift our fight against violent extremism and for democracy in ways that rely less on force while enhancing our own security and those of others. All with less cost in national treasure, lives and moral standing in the world.

Effects on America

US Maj. Nidal Malik Hassan, alleged killer of 13 fellow soldiers at Fort Hood in November 2009, exchanged over a score of emails with Awlaki before the rampage. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the British-educated Nigerian student charged with attempting to blow up a Detroit-bound plane with an underwear bomb on Christmas Day 2009, went to Yemen to find Awlaki and prepare for Jihad. Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani American who pleaded guilty to the May 2010 Times Square car bombing attempt, claimed "inspiration" from Awlaki after contacting him over the Internet. And Samir Khan, the internet hipster raised in Queens, left his parents home in North Carolina in 2009 to join Awlaki in Jihad against America.

Yet, there is no evidence that Awlaki had any direct role in the Fort Hood shootings or the Time Square bombing attempt, either through words or deeds. While Maj. Hassan initiated over a dozen emails to Awlaki asking, for example, if it was right to kill American soldiers, Awlaki sent back just two responses, saying merely that the question was "legitimate." (Awlaki publicly praised Hassan after the shooting, but that's another story). Similarly, nothing suggests Awlaki's direct involvement in Shahzad's plot. And while Awlaki's lectures on the meaning for Jihad of the Koran and early Muslim heroes may have persuaded Samir Khan to become a self-avowed traitor, even if such information were proven in court it would not likely result in Awlaki's conviction on any terrorism charges related to any of these cases.

Although many are ready to leap to the conclusion that Awlaki helped to "brainwash" and "indoctrinate" these jihadi wannabes, it was much more a matter of them seeking out the popular Internet preacher because they already self-radicalized to the point of wanting further guidance to act. Awlaki served more as an "attractor" than as a "recruiter," whose message and presence drew out self-seekers who were already well along on their own paths to violent extremism.

The order to execute an American citizen based on secret intelligence not subject to public scrutiny through the courts as guaranteed by the Constitution's Fifth Amendment is a dangerous precedent. But it was not entirely "extrajudicial" inasmuch as a federal judge did review and reject a lawsuit against the order brought by the American Civil Liberties Union. Unlike the Bush administration's justification for torture -- a morally abject denial of the basic human right against suffering "torments of the body" upon which Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith and Voltaire founded all other individual rights -- the order against Awlaki was not based merely on a dubious possibility (that information extracted might be useful in thwarting terrorism) but on saving people he planned to kill.

Thus, Omar Abdulmutallab and Samir Khan, too, were self-seekers who went to Yemen uninvited to find Awlaki, and managed to do so after weeks of effort on their part; only once they found Awlaki, his influence with them went well beyond inspiration and attraction. Together with Saudi master bomber Ibrahim al-Asiri (who had previously got his own brother to blow himself up in a failed mission to kill Saudi Prince Nayef with an underwear bomb), Awlaki had the leading operational role in planning Abdulmutallab's attempt to explode a plane about to land in order to achieve maximum casualties in the air and on the ground. And Awlaki, working with Samir Khan in the production of Inspire magazine, became lethally focused on persuading young American and British Muslims to remain in their countries as "truth-seeking traitors," while prodding them with practical lessons on how to hit soft targets (sniping attacks on highways, restaurant bombings) and advice on acquiring chemical and biological weapons for use against our cities.

From the vantage of domestic politics, then, President Obama's decision in early 2010 to place Awlaki on the CIA's "capture or kill," and the successful execution of that decision, generally earns points with most Americans. It puts the lie to the Palinism that Obama "pals around with terrorists," while doing little real damage to his base on the civil libertarian left. For al Qaeda's global ambitions, it will be very difficult to replace a Bin Laden or Awlaki with equally charismatic and creative personalities. This should garner political support for President Obama's strategy of relying more on pinpoint counter-terrorism strikes that target dangerous individuals rather than on broad counter-insurgency operations and missionary "nation-building" that wastes vastly more national resources and lives to produce very doubtful outcomes, as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Effects on Al Qaeda

Shortly after Awlaki's killing, President Obama dubbed him the head of AQAP's "external operations" unit, a bureaucratic label to make Awlaki's role in al Qaeda understandable to the American people but which distorts how Awlaki and AQAP have actually operated. Although Awlaki, Khan and Asiri strenuously tried but failed to kill Americans, their machinations were marginal to AQAP. Since its founding in January 2009, AQAP's Yemeni leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi, former personal secretary to Bin Laden, its Yemeni military commander Qasbi al-Raymi, and Saudi deputy leader Said Shihri have engaged primarily in trying to topple the current Yemeni regime of President Saleh as a prelude to taking on the Saudi monarchy.

These efforts involve a few hundred local fighters and, in the last few months, perhaps a few hundred more volunteers from Somalia's al-Shabab movement as well as Arab veterans of the Iraq war and various North African insurgencies. AQAP actions play out almost entirely in regional politics, tribal alliances and local battles that aim, much as with the Taliban, at seizing their homeland rather than in attacking ours. In this regard, it is telling that that Awlaki and Khan were killed in the north while traveling from Marib governorate to al-Jawf, far from AQAP's major theater of operations against government forces in the southern provinces (Abyan, Shabwah, Lahij, Aden).

In the last 3 years, there have been only 2 serious terrorist operations unambiguously instigated against the US from abroad: the 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt and the 2010 printer-cartridge plot to bring down US-bound cargo planes. All available information indicates that both plots were planned and prepared by the trio of Awlaki, Khan and Asiri, with scant involvement by other AQAP leaders or operatives. A third unsuccessful plot, Shahzad's Times Square firecracker bomb, may have involved some support or guidance by a faction of the Pakistani Taliban, whose representatives claimed this one-time role in attacking the US in response to the "the rain of drones" that has killed many of their leaders and many more of their noncombatant tribespeople.

So that's it: 3 unsuccessful plots against the US in 3 years that has some notable foreign component. Perhaps never before have so few people, with such few actual means, caused such fear in so many. Still, Awlaki's death has considerable symbolic value in a global conflict where symbolism and publicity far outweigh material damage as a measure of defeat or victory. For this man, with his folksy American manner and fluid English argument, provided al Qaeda's fading global virus a promise of renewal in the very belly of the beast, the American homeland.

Effects on The Arab Spring

But there's a rub that threatens to markedly reduce the effectiveness of the president's counter-terrorism strategy, especially with the Arab Street. Not that there is any love lost among most Arabs and Muslims because of Awlaki's demise. The vast majority has no more use for Awlaki than for Bin Laden, and is generally glad to be rid of them. The problem is that the intellectual framework for the president's CT strategy and its execution continue to depend on a close relationship between the US government and elements of the autocratic Old Guard, especially the military establishments set up to protect the systems of personal patronage by which the autocrats ruled and profited. And this runs directly counter to the aspirations of the Arab Spring.

There is a startling difference between visions and interpretations of the Arab Spring among participants in the countries where it is occurring, including Yemen, versus among the leaders of those countries and in the United States. Even a cursory perusal of YouTube videos, twitter messages, facebook posts or internet blogs reveal quite limited mention of al Qaeda among the protestors and their supporters, but ever-present expressions of concern about al Qaeda on the part of

Arab leaders and the United States. For example, in a recent report to the Pentagon on AQAP, our research team surveyed over half a million twitter messages related to Yemen's Arab Spring, and found over 40,000 tweets concerned with "protest" and "freedom," but only about 2,000 mentioning "terrorism" or "al Qaeda." Indeed, the most persistent messaging about al Qaeda among the protestors and their supporters is that the leaders they are opposing will try to keep themselves in power by playing on US fears of about al Qaeda, despite the fact that no successful al Qaeda attack upon America has occurred since 9/11.

To be sure, there have been a couple of dangerously close attempts. But it would be unfortunate if the US persisted in maintaining an overriding focus on government-to-government military action and aid, and accompanying programs of developmental assistance. For, such policy risks reinforcing the very types of repression and patronage that millions of young Arabs are spontaneously rising up against. Even in the short run, such a policy could help to generate renewed al Qaeda growth, especially in the peculiar local conditions of Yemen. Consider the recent military alliances of AQAP with disgruntled tribes in the northern provinces and with parts of the Southern Movement, including various secular, tribal and Islamic forces marginalized by the regime's corroded patronage system centered on Mr. Saleh, his immediate family, and his Hashid tribe.

After the Arab Spring broke out and President Saleh was evacuated to Saudi Arabia with serious wounds following an assassination attempt, airstrikes and other US counter-terrorism efforts were suspended. But with heightened AQAP activity in the ensuing political vacuum, CENTCOM has been persistently pushing for renewed strikes against top militants should credible intelligence on their whereabouts become available. President Saleh's return from Saudi Arabia just one week ago was accompanied by a renewed crackdown on protestors as well as greater freedom for US military maneuver in Yemen, including more intense and wide-ranging drone activity (despite official US denials that Saleh's return has affected counter-terrorism operations). Airstrikes, whether from drones or fighter jets, although less likely to produce shotgun effects on surrounding noncombatant populations than full-scale counter-insurgency operations, can still be disastrously messy and backfire. For example, in December 2009, acting on intelligence that AQAP leader were in the southern governorate of Abyan and that Awlaki was back in his own tribal region in the adjacent governorate of Shabwah, American planes attacked suspected AQAP targets in both provinces. The Shabwah attack killed a number of militants (but not al-Awlaki) and led locals to demand that AQAP operatives leave. But the Abyan airstrike killed a number of women and children, which only increased local tolerance for the presence of AQAP fighters in their midst.

For Yemen's Arab Springers, Awlaki's death has minor positive significance. But many Yemenis fear that America's renewed drone-driven counter-terrorism campaign will enable President Ali Abdullah Saleh - or at least elements of his military Old Guard - to hold onto power, while giving the marginal movement of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula greater ability to insinuate itself into a brutalized political opposition willing to ally with anyone intent on regime change.

For the U.S., the promotion of democracy and human rights, and endeavors to address longstanding local grievances held by vast numbers of Yemenis, have taken a distant back seat to immediate American security concerns with a small handful of terrorists. These concerns are still addressed primarily by cultivating Mr. Saleh, his family and cronies. There is no indication that this policy has changed to any significant degree, whether or not Saleh himself survives in power. Thus, proposals by US organizations to receive US government funding to dispense military and development aid to Yemen still tout close relations with core elements of the Saleh regime as justification for obtaining Defense and State Department contracts.

According to the [June 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism](#) issued by the White House:

Even as we work to support Yemen's stability and the aspirations of the Yemeni people, the defeat of AQAP will remain our CT priority in the region, and we will continue to leverage and strengthen our partnerships to achieve this end.... The United States is working with regional and international partners to advance a number of political and economic development initiatives that address the underlying conditions that allow Yemen to serve as a safehaven for AQAP. These broader efforts complement those CT initiatives that are focused on building the capacity of Yemeni security services so they are able eventually to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat AQAP with only limited U.S. involvement.

The fundamental question is which partnerships will the US continue to leverage and strengthen? If these partnerships are focused on the Old Guard, then they are likely to backfire with the public. But if they are to focus on emerging democratic forces in the country, then little, if any, actionable initiative or even planning is evident in any current US counterterrorism strategy and effort in Yemen.

A Brief Opportunity for Strategic Breakthrough

Continued adherence to the prevailing paradigm of government-to-government military and development assistance arguably props up corrupt patronage relationships that tend to centralize power, and so reinforces remnants of the authoritarian regimes that Arab populations - which have majorities of deeply frustrated but aspiring young people under 30 - now massively reject. The alternatives are not simple, straightforward or clear. This is especially so in places where the government is weak and democratic forces are not yet strong. But we must earnestly begin to think and act in ways that risks further alienating, and thus undermining, popular sentiment against groups that encourage violence or exclusive control over national life. Because if the Arab Spring implodes, as al Qaeda and company so fervently desire, then we may see the resurgence of a viral movement that lauds death over life as the way of the world.

Perhaps the best long-term approach to countering violent extremism is to identify shared values with currents of the Arab Spring and how they may be used to build social, political and economic relationships favorable, or at least not hostile, to our way of life. Such an approach must reflect the reality we face. Surveys and polls consistently reveal that majorities throughout the Muslim world prefer governments that uphold both "Islamic values and principles" including dignity (qarama) and social justice ('adala ijtima'iah), and democratic principles, including exchange and tolerance of opposing views, political representativeness and responsibility, and human rights.

The emerging union of Islam and democracy is new to the Muslim world and alien to most non-Muslims. We must engage these phenomena in novel and creative ways that subtly support, rather than strangle in strong embrace, shared values that can sustain cooperation and peace among our societies. This may require a shift on our part from top-heavy government-to-government planning and programs to establishing relationships with local actors and groups, including relationship involving America's most influential, efficient and productive non-governmental national resources: US universities, entertainment media, small-business groups, faith-based organizations.

Eliminating Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan (and perhaps also Ibrahim al-Asiri, who some reports place in the same drone-destroyed convoy) creates a brief opportunity for restoring America's shattering moral standing in the Arab and Muslim world. President Obama can now claim that the biggest short-term threat to national security from abroad has been nearly neutralized. As a result, the US is now less bound by immediate counter-terrorism priorities to protect its citizens from imminent harm originating in Yemen, and so freer to pursue forward-looking policies that encourage the "democratic dynamics" of the Arab Spring in that country. This is liable to be a less costly but more promising framework for combating violent extremism in the long run, truly enhancing US security and influence while greatly reducing military and foreign aid expenditure.

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